

# The press versus the president, part four

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## Chapter 4: Helsinki and the \$3,000 Russian disinformation campaign

Trump, in July 2018, finally had a summit meeting with Vladimir Putin, the man he mistakenly claimed in 2015 to have met years earlier and his supposed puppet master, according to Steele's dossier.

In advance of the summit, Trump met with his national security adviser, John Bolton, to discuss how to deal with Russian meddling. The president "remained unwilling or unable to admit any Russian meddling because he believed doing so would undercut the legitimacy of his election and the narrative of the witch hunt against him," Bolton wrote in his 2020 memoir *The Room Where It Happened*.

At a press briefing, the final question was whether US intelligence or Putin should be believed with regard to meddling in the 2016 election. After going on a tangent about the server at the DNC, Trump said, "I don't see any reason why it would be" Russia that did it. Then, a bit later in his answer, he expressed "great confidence in my intelligence people."

The first remark received all the attention. Some outlets, like the *Times*, didn't include his comments about "great confidence" in US intelligence in their stories, while others, such as the *Post*, did.

Trump flew home to Washington, and when aides talked to him the next day about the reaction, he said he meant the opposite.

A clarification was released, but the cleanup was not enough for critics such as Roger Cohen, then a columnist at the *Times*, who wrote of the "disgusting spectacle of the American president kowtowing in Helsinki to Vladimir Putin."

Rachel Maddow, the MSNBC host, saw the day's events as affirmation of her having covered the Trump-Russia matter "more than anyone else," because, as her blog pointed out, Americans were now "coming to grips with a worst-case scenario that the US president is compromised by a hostile foreign power."

For his part, Trump, when asked about Helsinki in my interview, blasted Bolton. “Bolton was one of the dumber people, but I loved him for the negotiations,” he said, because “all these countries,” aware of Bolton’s hawkish views, “thought we were going to blow them up” when Bolton sat in on the negotiations. (Bolton declined to comment.)

Trump insisted to me that while “I said nice things” about Putin, “I killed them with Nord Stream,” the German/Russian pipeline his administration sanctioned in 2019 until “Biden comes in and approves it.” (The Biden administration waived sanctions on the project in May 2021, and then, after Russia invaded Ukraine, reinstated the sanctions.)

I tried to ask Trump what he thought about Russia’s nuclear capabilities. His former aides have publicly and privately said he was fixated on Moscow’s nuclear arsenal, including the large number of Russian nuclear weapons targeting the US. But Trump demurred, implying it involved classified information, and talked instead about his deceased uncle, who was a professor of engineering at MIT and did some research related to nuclear energy.

Finally, when asked about his remarks at Helsinki that were seen by many as denigrating the American intelligence community, Trump didn’t say he had misspoken, as Kellyanne Conway, in her 2022 memoir, says he told her. Instead, he clarified his initial remarks in a different way. Trump said he wasn’t thinking of the entire intelligence community but rather his distrust of James Clapper, John Brennan, and James Comey, the former heads of the various intelligence agencies under President Obama: “These guys were terrible people,” he said.

After Conway’s book came out, I asked Trump again about his remarks: he doubled down.

“I was disparaging them; who would I trust more? Comey, Clapper, Brennan, and the American sleaze or Putin?” He added, “I don’t think we needed too much of a clarification.”

In the aftermath of the summit, Trump’s critics believed the worst. A Yougov/ *Economist* poll found that two-thirds of Democrats were definitely or somewhat sure that “Russia tampered with vote tallies in order to get Donald Trump elected.”

Despite the US intelligence community’s assessment in January 2017 that it couldn’t measure “the impact that Russian activities had on the outcome of the 2016 election,” the *Times* weighed in, at over ten thousand words in September, with its own verdict: “The Plot to Subvert an Election,” the headline read. The first sentence described an obscure banner of Putin that unfurled on his birthday, a few weeks before the election, on a Manhattan bridge. The report quickly noted that the banner was promoted by a fake Twitter account that ultimately was traced back to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a privately owned troll operation in Russia.

This was part, the *Times* concluded in the fourth paragraph, of “the most effective foreign interference in an American election in history.” To help buttress its sweeping conclusion, the *Times* wrote that the Facebook posts by the IRA had an “eventual audience of 126 million Americans,” describing that as an “impressive” reach that almost matched the numbers of voters in the election.

For most of the media, and official Washington, the impact of Russian activities on the 2016 election loomed large, though a number of rigorous academic studies that the media largely ignored painted a more benign footprint.

Gareth Porter, a veteran journalist and historian, called the *Times*' description of the IRA's "eventual audience" of 126 million "bogus" because Facebook had told Congress, and reporters, months earlier that the figure was only a potential audience for IRA content over two years, including nine months after the election. When Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified, several months before the piece, he said "approximately 126 million people may have been served content" from the IRA.

Facebook data submitted to Congress about the IRA's ads on its site further diminished their impact: more than half of the impressions associated with the IRA's Facebook ads came after the election.

Porter, writing in *Consortium News*, said the *Times*' use of the 126 million audience number, plus the piece's failure to reflect that Facebook users were exposed to 33 trillion news feeds during the relevant period, "should vie in the annals of journalism as one of the most spectacularly misleading use of statistics of all time."

As for the IRA's supposed "efficiency," noted in the article, the *Times* piece didn't include Facebook submissions to Congress that called the IRA's targeting "relatively rudimentary," with only a small fraction having anything to do with the election or specific geographic targets.

Court filings in 2019 showed that the total value of the IRA's Facebook ads that were deemed election-related amounted to \$2,930, in a political cycle where billions of dollars were spent. The only reporter to write about that finding was Sperry, of Real Clear Investigations.

Even before that, studies, largely ignored by the media, pointed to a more modest impact. A book by Harvard researchers, *Network Propaganda*, published by Oxford University Press in October 2018, found "strong" evidence of Russian interference operations in America but noted that "evidence of its impact is scant." A study by Danish and American scholars published by the National Academy of Science the following year found "no evidence" that interaction with the IRA accounts "substantially impacted" the "political attitudes and behaviors" of Twitter users.

The deep dive by Harvard researchers warned that "overstating the impact" of Russian information operations "helps consolidate" the aim of the operations to "disorient American political communications."

Still, several years after the 2016 election, many voters believe Russian meddling had a big impact on those results, and the mainstream narrative in journalism was that it had. A study by Rasmussen in April 2022 found that 47 percent of voters, including 72 percent of Democrats, think Russian interference likely changed the outcome of the 2016 race.

Legal developments involving people in Trump's orbit kept the Russia narrative simmering. In late November 2018, Michael Cohen, Trump's former lawyer, pleaded guilty to lying to Congress

about attempts by Trump to conduct a real estate deal in Moscow. Cohen had told both intelligence committees of Congress that “the Moscow Project ended in January 2016,” but documents show he was in communication with others, though not Trump, about the project through June of 2016, according to the criminal information filed by the special counsel.

The project never happened, but the media viewed the attempt as more evidence of Russian ties. After all, Cohen was once a Trump insider, so many in the press saw his cooperation with Mueller as a chance to fill in some of the missing pieces of the puzzle. Did Cohen really go to Prague in 2016 as part of the campaign’s conspiracy with Russia, as the dossier had alleged? Cohen had always denied it, and the press, except for the McClatchy News Service, had basically dismissed it as a tall tale, after considerable efforts to verify it.

Cohen, even as a cooperating witness, continued to deny it. McClatchy, in 2019, ran an editor’s note saying Mueller’s report “states that Mr. Cohen was not in Prague,” but was “silent” on whether Cohen’s phone “pinged in or near Prague, as McClatchy reported,” according to an account in the *Washington Examiner*. Mate, writing in *The Nation* in 2021, called the note “tepid.” (Susan Firey, a spokesperson for the newspaper chain, did not reply to an email.)

As 2019 arrived, *BuzzFeed*, the outlet that posted the dossier two years earlier, dropped a seeming bombshell: Trump had directed Cohen to lie to Congress about the Moscow Project. The story was attributed to two anonymous law enforcement sources. The special counsel’s office issued a rare denunciation of the *BuzzFeed* story the next day, calling it “not accurate.”

Mueller’s final report said that Trump “knew Cohen provided false testimony to Congress” but the evidence obtained by investigators “does not establish the president directed or aided Cohen’s false testimony.” After the report was released, *BuzzFeed*’s then–editor in chief, Ben Smith, insisted in a post that his reporters’ anonymous sources saw it differently: they “interpreted the evidence Cohen presented as meaning that the president ‘directed’ Cohen to lie.”

When the original story was posted and then denounced, Greenwald, the cofounder of *The Intercept*, used the brushback to list the “Ten Worst, Most Embarrassing US Media Failures on the Trump Russia Story.” He pointed out that all the “errors” went in the same direction: “exaggerating the grave threat posed by Moscow and the Trump circle’s connections to it.”

Meanwhile, the Mueller investigation was winding down. The inquiry had issued more than 2,800 subpoenas, interviewed 500 witnesses, and generated enormous interest. There were 533,000 news articles published involving Russia and Trump or Mueller, between Mueller’s appointment and the release of his report, according to a study by NewsWhip, a media analytics company. The articles led to 245 million interactions on social media, the study, funded by the media site Axios, also found.

With the release of the findings imminent, Barr was briefed on the inquiry, sat down with Mueller and his colleagues, and learned of their two overarching conclusions: no case of conspiracy or collusion between the Russians and Trump—though there had been offers from

Russian-affiliated individuals to help the Trump campaign—and ten episodes that raised possible obstruction-of-justice issues but no analysis or determination of whether they constituted a crime.

Barr asked Mueller and his team to promptly deliver their final report with the proper redactions, such as classified or grand jury information. The lengthy two volumes came back without the redactions, so Barr, unfamiliar with the details, went about writing a letter to inform Congress of the topline results.

Barr sent his letter to Congress on March 24. It said it was meant to “summarize the principal conclusions reached” by Mueller. With regard to possible obstruction, the letter noted the report “presented evidence on both sides of the question” but left unresolved what Mueller had called “difficult issues.” The report specifically said it “does not exonerate” Trump, which Barr quoted in his letter.

The three-page letter was released. Those hoping for Trump’s downfall were disappointed. The president declared victory, tweeting bombastically about “complete and total exoneration.” And Mueller and his team cried foul: their beef, it turns out, was, at least in part, with the media.

Mueller’s team wanted more information to be released. So did the media: one *Times* article wondered “what Barr might have left out.” Mueller’s team forwarded summaries to Barr and attached a letter from Mueller stating that Barr’s communiqué three days earlier “did not fully capture the context, nature and substance of this office’s work and conclusions.” The letter quickly leaked to the *Washington Post* and was covered extensively by the media, which highlighted concerns that Barr had left out “more damaging” material, as the *Times* wrote.

The blowback pissed Barr off. He finally got Mueller on the phone, after the special counsel returned from a haircut the morning of March 28. Over speakerphone, Mueller agreed that Barr’s letter was “not factually wrong” but explained his concern to the attorney general: “without more context, there is a vacuum that the press is filling with misrepresentations. It is the way the press is covering it that is the problem, not what you said,” according to Barr’s book. Two of Mueller’s top aides, Aaron Zebley and James Quarles, did not respond to emails seeking comment.

The next day, Barr wrote another letter to Congress noting that “some media reports and other public statements” had mischaracterized his first letter as a “summary” of Mueller’s “investigation and report,” when it was only a summary of the “principal conclusions.” He asked people to wait to read the whole report “on their own” and not in “piecemeal fashion.”

Barr was now a villain to some, but not others. And new schisms in the media emerged over prior coverage.

Isikoff had previously begun having doubts about the credibility of the dossier, but Barr’s letter pushed him further down that road. He went on MSNBC soon after the letter’s release and criticized the network for its coverage of the dossier, including its being “endorsed multiple times” and having “people saying it’s more and more proving to be true. And it wasn’t.” A few

months later, on his own podcast, the Yahoo journalist pressed Rachel Maddow about coverage of Russia and Steele's dossier. She was not happy: "You're trying to litigate the Steele dossier through me as if I am the embodiment of the Steele dossier, which I think is creepy, and I think it's unwarranted."

Isikoff says he's only been on MSNBC a few times since 2019, but before that he "was a semi-regular" guest.

A few weeks after Barr's letter, Mueller's report, now redacted and coming in at over four hundred pages, was released. It consisted of two volumes: the first spelled out Russian meddling and links or contacts between Russians and Trump's universe, while the second contained the ten instances of possible obstruction.

The report found "multiple links between Trump Campaign officials and individuals tied to the Russian government," including "Russian offers of assistance to the Campaign," which were sometimes welcomed and sometimes declined. In the end, "the investigation did not establish that the Campaign coordinated or conspired with the Russian government" in its election activities.

The report mentions the 2018 indictment of twelve Russian intelligence officials charged with hacking data related to the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign in 2016, though the report is far from definitive. First, it notes that the charged officers "appear to have stolen thousands of emails and attachments." The report also says the investigators "could not rule out that stolen documents were transferred to WikiLeaks through intermediaries." (The case has never been brought to trial.)

The first volume of the report also notes that the Russian government intervened in the 2016 election in "sweeping and systemic fashion," through two activities, the hacking and dumping operation involving Clinton-campaign-related emails and a social media campaign run by a Russian entity, the IRA. The report implied the IRA was a government-controlled body by writing that it was part of an "active measures" campaign, "typically" done by "Russian security services."

For the most part the media, having already learned that there was no overarching conspiracy, fleshed out the new details, including the more than a hundred "links" cited by Mueller. The most troubling contact involved Manafort, Trump's campaign chairman for part of 2016, and Kilimnik, who ran Manafort's consulting-business office in Ukraine. On August 2, 2016, the two men met in Manhattan, where Manafort shared campaign polling data, some private and some public, with Kilimnik. The Mueller report said Kilimnik is someone that the "FBI assesses to have ties to Russian intelligence." (Mueller indicted Kilimnik in 2018 for obstruction of justice, unrelated to the 2016 election, but the case has never gone forward.)

Andrew Weissmann, one of Mueller's prosecutors, went on CNN after the release of the Mueller report to say that August meeting "was the heart" of the investigation. Steele, in response to my

questions, cites the Manafort-Kilimnik relationship as confirming and/or corroborating the “Russian collusion efforts with the Trump campaign.”

The fifth and final report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, released in August 2020, highlighted the connection as the “single most important direct tie between senior Trump Campaign officials and the Russian intelligence services” and labeled it “a grave counterintelligence threat” to the United States. Some of the Democratic members of the panel, in an addendum, wrote that Manafort’s sharing of campaign data “is what collusion looks like.”

But the evidence of Kilimnik’s Kremlin ties is far from certain, and the question of whether Manafort’s dealings with him were personal or campaign-related are even murkier.

As for Kilimnik possibly being a Russian spy, the only known official inquiry, by Ukraine in 2016, didn’t result in charges. More recent claims that he worked for the Russians, by the Senate intelligence panel in 2020 and the Treasury Department in 2021, offered no evidence. Conversely, there are FBI and State Department documents showing Kilimnik was a “sensitive source” for the latter. (The documents were disclosed a few years ago by John Solomon, founder of the *Just the News* website. Kilimnik, in an email to me, confirmed his ties with State.)

With regard to the motivation for sharing the polling data, Mueller’s report said it “could not reliably determine” why the data was shared or what happened with it. The two Americans involved in the arrangement, Manafort and his deputy, both told Mueller’s team that the data was passed on to help Manafort’s personal finances, including a business dispute with Oleg Deripaska, a Russian oligarch, who has had ties to Moscow as well as the FBI. Kilimnik told a similar version to Mate. But Treasury, without any supporting evidence, went further in 2021, saying the data was shared with Russian intelligence.

## **Chapter 5: The scandal that never ends**

The *Times*, for many years, has cited the Kilimnik-Manafort relationship to defend its controversial story of February 2017 about Trump-Russia ties, noting, as recently as 2021, that the Senate and Treasury statements “confirm the article’s findings.” Kilimnik was not quoted in the article, one of several *Times* articles in recent years mentioning his possible Russian intelligence ties but failing to report his denials. (The *Times*’ guidelines call for reporters to “seek and publish a response from anyone criticized in our pages.”) The *Times*, in response to my questions, said it “reached out to Kilimnik for comment on multiple occasions since 2017.”

The Mueller report’s implication that the IRA was part of a “sweeping” Russian government meddling campaign in 2016 was later rebuked by a federal Judge handling an IRA-related case. The indictment of the IRA, the judge found, alleged “only private conduct by private actors” and “does not link the [IRA] to the Russian government.” The prosecutors made clear they were not prepared to show that the IRA efforts were a government operation. Mueller’s report does refer to “ties” between Putin and the owner of the IRA—he is sometimes referred to as “Putin’s

Cook”—and the fact that “the two have appeared together in public photographs.” Mueller’s source for that was an article in the *Times*.

As for the extent of the troll farm’s activity, Mueller’s report cites a review by Twitter of tweets from accounts “associated with the IRA,” in the ten weeks before the 2016 election, which found that “approximately 8.4%” were “election related.” Only the St. Louis Post Dispatch covered that part of the report, according to a Nexis search.

(One criminal case involving Russian trolling that was prosecuted was dropped by the Justice Department in March 2020. The *Times*, in its story about the decision, only quoted the prosecutor, while the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post* also included quotes from the Russian company’s American lawyer.)

While some critics, on both the right and the left, felt the Russia coverage was overblown and reminiscent of earlier media failures, others did not.

Margaret Sullivan, then the media columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote that the reporting “was not invalidated” by the report, and “this is no time to retreat.”

Trump’s Democratic opponents in Congress were in no mood to retreat either, and many Americans, mostly Democrats, agreed. An Ipsos/Reuters poll showed 48 percent of Americans—84 percent of Democrats and 17 percent of Republicans—still believed Trump or his campaign “worked with Russia to influence the 2016 election.” Congressional Democrats saw Mueller’s report, specifically the second volume on possible obstruction of justice, as a template to impeach the president. Their star witness would be McGahn, the former White House counsel who became the most-cited witness in Mueller’s final report.

McGahn’s account of Trump directing him to fire Mueller was featured in the report. So were two high-profile examples that Mueller, according to Barr, “relied on” to launch his obstruction probe: the president’s firing of Comey in May 2017 and Trump’s remarks to Comey in February 2017, the day after Flynn resigned, that “I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go.”

From a criminal perspective, the cases had complications, especially proving Trump acted with “corrupt intent,” according to Barr, who, with other senior attorneys at Justice, reviewed the evidence and found it insufficient.

In the case of McGahn, Barr, in an interview, said that “a lot of witnesses, including McGahn and others, tried to convey that no one took a lot of Trump’s bloviating seriously. They thought that he was letting off steam.” McGahn himself had told Mueller’s investigators “he believed the president never obstructed justice,” the *Times* would later report.

Schmidt, perhaps the reporter with the best insight into Mueller’s operation, found the report’s section on possible obstruction to be hard to decipher; “they took everything and threw it out on the sidewalk,” he told the Virginia Bar Association in early 2020, according to a video recording.



The Democrat-controlled Congress, however, thought it might be able to pick up those disparate pieces and fashion an impeachment case. They decided to push a reluctant Mueller to come testify himself, hoping he might help make their case.

Mueller appeared in late July before the House Judiciary Committee. Schmidt was contemporaneously posting analysis on the *Times* website about Mueller's testimony. At just past eight in the morning, he signed in: "Can't wait to hear Mueller talk about Volume II on obstruction." As Mueller began answering questions, Schmidt noted how he kept asking for them to be repeated. Then a few hours later, he posted this: "the Democrats say it was indeed obstruction and Mueller declines to back them up."

Mueller's "halting" testimony, as noted by the *Times* and many other outlets, was likely the final chapter in his lengthy public life.

Woodward told me the Mueller report was a "fizzle" but reporters were "never going to declare it's going to end up dry."

The following morning, less than eighteen hours after Mueller left the congressional hearing, a more confident Trump had his phone call with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky in which he asked him for help in digging up dirt on Joe and Hunter Biden.

What Trump thought was a "perfect" phone chat turned out to be the impeachment vehicle Democrats so desperately wanted after Mueller's far-from-perfect performance. A new media frenzy was about to begin.

## **Chapter 6: The two January 6ths**

Even with Mueller finished, the ongoing probes into Trump's activities were giving the press the fodder to keep the drumbeat going.

First was the appointment in May 2019 of John Durham, a career prosecutor, once praised by his home-state Democratic senators in Connecticut, to examine the origins of the various Trump inquiries. Then came a lengthy, and critical, report, released in December 2019 by Inspector General Michael Horowitz, into the secret surveillance of former Trump adviser Carter Page. And in early 2020 Barr asked Jeffrey Jensen, a former FBI agent and the US Attorney in Missouri, to review the Flynn inquiry.

Durham, stalled by the pandemic, has brought three cases: a guilty plea by an FBI lawyer, an indictment (and eventual acquittal) of Democratic lawyer Michael Sussmann for lying to the FBI, and an indictment (and eventual acquittal), on multiple charges of lying to the FBI, of the main information collector for the dossier authored by Steele.

The few cases, however, yielded a trove of new information. Durham's filings last February described monitoring done at Trump Tower, a Trump apartment building in Manhattan, and the

Executive Office of the Presidency by private researchers, who were working with a technology executive. The executive, according to the filing, tasked them “to mine internet data to establish ‘an inference’ and ‘narrative’ tying then candidate Trump to Russia.” The businessman did not work for any campaign, but his lawyer, Sussmann, was a well-known Democratic attorney who billed both the DNC and the Clinton campaign in 2016, according to court filings.

Fox News was the first to pick up the filing, and its headline—“Clinton campaign paid to ‘infiltrate’ Trump Tower, White House servers to link Trump to Russia, Durham Finds”—conflated Durham’s disclosure with a quote by someone who used the word “infiltrate” to characterize the activities. Before long, Trump claimed the filing vindicated his 2017 claim of spying—the tweet about Obama having his “wires tapped” at Trump Tower—also drawn from a Fox News report. And he criticized the press for refusing to “even mention the major crime that took place.”

At that point the *Times* weighed in, headlining the “Furor in Right-Wing Outlets” whose “Narrative Is Off Track.” It accurately noted that neither “infiltrate” nor evidence of the Clinton campaign paying the tech executive appeared in the court filing. The Fox News journalist who wrote the story, Brooke Singman, and a spokesperson for the network did not respond to an email. (Singman was the first journalist Trump spoke to after the unannounced search of his Mar-a-Lago residence by the FBI in August.)

One result of Durham’s investigation has been to further discredit the dossier in the eyes of many in the media. It prompted the *Washington Post* to retract large chunks of a 2017 article in November 2021, and to follow with a long review of Steele’s sources and methods. The *Wall Street Journal* and CNN did similar looks back.

The *Times* has offered no such retraction, though the paper and other news organizations were quick to highlight the lack of firsthand evidence for many of the dossier’s substantive allegations; “third hand stuff” is what Isikoff now calls them. But they rarely, if ever, pointed out that the origin of the FBI inquiry was itself third hand information, at best. The supposed original source of the information, Mifsud, the Maltese academic, disappeared, leaving behind many questions. So, in the fall of 2019, Barr and Durham went to Italy to look into Mifsud after Barr told Congress he wanted to know whether the FBI inquiry was “properly predicated.”

The *Times* story called the trip “unusual” and a possible attempt to bolster a Trump “conspiracy theory.” The *Daily Beast* reported that the two men were given access to evidence gathered by the Italian authorities, including a taped deposition made by Mifsud when he sought police protection after disappearing from the university where he worked.

By the end of the year Barr answered his own question: no, the FBI inquiry was not properly predicated. He and Durham wound up in an unusual public spat that December with Horowitz, as he released his long-awaited report on the FBI’s handling of its Russia investigation. Horowitz found the tip from Australia was enough to trigger an inquiry—“given the low threshold for predication” in department guidelines—and that the opening was not influenced by “political bias,” countering Trump’s frequent cries that he was the victim of a political “witch hunt.”

But the IG also found seventeen significant errors and omissions by the FBI in its four applications to a secret court to monitor Page, who the bureau believed was spying for Russia; the *Times* called the IG's finding "scathing."

Eventually the FBI declared that at least two of the four applications were no longer valid. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) found that all four applications had "violations of the government's duty of candor." Horowitz also referred an FBI attorney, Kevin Clinesmith, to Durham for possibly falsifying evidence in one of the court applications. Clinesmith later pleaded guilty to failing to disclose Page's previous work with the CIA in the FBI's application to the FISC; he received probation.

Barr and Durham put out statements disagreeing with the IG's finding of there being sufficient evidence to open the inquiry. Strzok, in an interview last July, called Durham's remarks "wildly irresponsible and wrong." Durham did not respond to an email seeking comment, but in arguments before a jury last October, speaking about the Trump-Russia investigation, he said, "The FBI failed here."

Strzok also said he was only involved in the first FISA warrant against Page, having "supervisory responsibility," but the "drafting and approval process was below my level of responsibility." (In an October 2016 text message, he wrote that he was "fighting" with the Justice Department over the warrant.)

In the years that followed, some in the media would wonder why more questions weren't asked about Durham's evidence, while others continued to dismiss the notion that the FBI acted improperly when it opened an investigation that involved a presidential campaign.

On his way out the door as attorney general, Barr told a *Wall Street Journal* columnist that the inquiry shouldn't have been opened because "there wasn't any evidence." The *Times* dismissed those remarks. After quoting Barr, the paper wrote that the FBI inquiry has "fueled similar unfounded accusations that a so-called deep state of government officials were working together to hobble Mr. Trump's campaign and the administration." A few months later, the *Times* wrote that Durham "appears to be retreading ground" explored by Horowitz or pursuing "Trumpian conspiracy theories and grievances," citing unnamed "people familiar with the investigation."

Wemple focused on the IG's dossier-related revelations and the reluctance of some in the media to look back. In an interview, he said he was "horrified" over its "devastating" portrayal of the dossier. He wound up writing more than a dozen columns on the subject, praising Adam Goldman of the *New York Times* but taking aim at McClatchy, CNN, and MSNBC, among others. "What most dismayed me," he went on, "was the failure of MSNBC and CNN to counter and properly address the questions I was asking them." CNN, in November 2021, did a long examination—what it called a "reckoning"—of the dossier. A spokesman for NBC declined to comment.

In May 2020, the Justice Department dropped the case against Flynn for lying to the FBI after a review by Jensen, the US Attorney in St. Louis. The department cited the FBI's "frail and shifting justifications for its ongoing probe of Mr. Flynn" and said that the FBI interview of Flynn was "conducted without any legitimate investigative basis."

Flynn was eventually pardoned by President Trump after the election. Trump also commuted the sentence of Roger Stone, a Trump associate, who was convicted on false-statement and obstruction charges related to his efforts in 2016 to serve as an intermediary between the campaign and WikiLeaks. Mueller "failed to resolve" the question of whether Stone had "directly communicated" with Julian Assange, the site's founder, before the election, according to the *Times*.

In 2020, the 966-page report by the Senate intelligence panel went a little further. It said that WikiLeaks "very likely knew it was assisting a Russian intelligence influence effort" when it acquired and made public in 2016 emails from the DNC. A few months after the report was released, new information surfaced showing why the special counsel, with greater investigative powers than the Senate panel, couldn't bring a case. The newly unredacted documents were obtained by *BuzzFeed*, via a Freedom of Information Act request. The Mueller team, the documents show, determined that while Russian hacking efforts were underway at the time of the releases by WikiLeaks in July 2016, "the Office did not develop sufficient admissible evidence that WikiLeaks knew of—or even was willfully blind to—that fact." The Senate report also suggests Stone had greater involvement with the dissemination of hacked material released by WikiLeaks.

The Flynn release was part of a months-long effort by the Justice Department to declassify and release documents related to the Trump-Russia inquiries. One revelation concerned the dossier's primary source: he himself had been the subject of an earlier counterintelligence investigation by the FBI into his ties to Russia. Nothing came of that inquiry, and the FBI documents, sent to Republicans in Congress, redacted his name.

But internet sleuths used the new documents and other clues to identify him as Danchenko. The *Times* was interested in the "unmasking." Its headline in late July read "The FBI Pledged to Keep a Source Anonymous. Trump Allies Aided His Unmasking." Then, in October, the paper got an exclusive interview with Danchenko, saying he "wants to clear his name." The top of the story featured the salacious sex tape allegation—the item Comey told Trump about on January 6, 2017—and Danchenko's supposed backup for it: "rumors from two sources" and "more nebulous information from two hotel employees he took as corroborative."

The day after the *Times* article, Danchenko and his friends used the piece to help a GoFundMe campaign on his behalf. (Danchenko was found not guilty of lying to the FBI last October.) Then a mirror image of the Trump-Russia story surfaced, after the *New York Post* ran a series of stories disclosing "raunchy" details of Hunter Biden's private life, as well as inside correspondence related to his business dealings in Ukraine and China. It came from the contents of his laptop, said to have been abandoned in 2019 at a computer repair shop in

Delaware. The first story included photos of a federal grand jury subpoena seeking production of the laptop and an external hard drive.

Reporters who ferreted out the details of the FBI inquiry into Trump's campaign couldn't, or wouldn't, confirm the Justice Department investigation into the future president's son. Whereas the specter of purported Russian ties to Trump spurred an explosion of social media and journalistic interest, this time Twitter and Facebook temporarily curbed the reach of the *Post* story.

The *Post* stories said the laptop "had been seized by the FBI," but "a copy of its contents" had been made by the owner of the computer repair shop where Biden had dropped it off but had "never retrieved" it. The material wound up with Rudy Giuliani, the former New York City mayor and Trump confidant, and he had "shared" it with the newspaper.

Hunter Biden's attorney, in a statement to the *Post*, didn't deny the contents of the laptop but attacked Giuliani, who had helped Trump in the Mueller inquiry and his impeachment over Ukraine. "He has been pushing widely discredited conspiracy theories about the Biden family, openly relying on actors tied to Russian intelligence," the lawyer, George Mesires, told the New York tabloid.

In short order, Clapper, Obama's former head of national intelligence, told CNN, where he is a national-security analyst, that the laptop saga "is just classic textbook Soviet Russian tradecraft at work."

Most outlets wrote stories about the matter, but, unable to obtain or verify copies of the laptop data, eschewed deep dives into the underlying transactions and relationships. The *Times* did explore one proposed deal with a Chinese energy company that had been the focus of a *Times* report in 2018. But Tom Friedman, a *Times* columnist, told CNBC's *Squawk Box* last July that the paper believed it didn't do enough: "I know the NYT felt it didn't pursue it originally as much as it wanted to," he said, but "then it followed up, as I recall." The *Times* said in its statement, "Dating back years and more recently, the *Times* has reported consistently and fairly on Hunter Biden and his personal and financial entanglements."

In the wake of the *New York Post* story, Schiff went on CNN to claim "the origins of this whole smear are from the Kremlin." Around this time, a group of more than fifty former intelligence and national-security officials were preparing a statement linking the laptop story to Russia, saying it "has all the classic hallmarks of a Russian information operation."

In short order, the letter, was given to Natasha Bertrand, then a *Politico* reporter and now at CNN, by Nick Shapiro, a former aide to Brennan, Obama's last CIA director. (Brennan signed the letter. I left a message on Brennan's cellphone. Shapiro returned the call. Neither would comment on the record.) The headline on Bertrand's story read "Hunter Biden story is Russian disinfo, dozens of former intel officials say."

The letter, and Bertrand's story, made clear the signers were relying on their "experience," not evidence: "we do not have evidence of Russian involvement," they wrote. But it was good

enough to be picked up in dozens of news reports, tweeted by Biden's campaign, and cited by Biden himself in his final debate with Trump, which attracted sixty-three million television viewers. The two candidates sparred over Russia, with Trump comparing his "tougher" record on Russia, such as sanctions, to that of his predecessor, when Biden was vice president. Biden shot back, telling Trump "Russia is paying you a lot." Trump brought up "the laptop from hell," which prompted Biden to cite the letter from the former intelligence officials, saying they called his accusation "a Russian plan" and "a bunch of garbage."

"You mean the laptop is now another Russia, Russia, Russia hoax?" Trump asked his opponent. Biden replied, "That's exactly what—that is exactly what we've been told." Trump ended the brouhaha by saying, "Here we go again with Russia."

A majority of Americans told pollsters that the media did a poor job of covering the Hunter Biden affair, according to a December 2020 survey by Rasmussen Reports and a poll last year by the New Jersey-based Technometrica Institute of Policy and Politics.

After the election, Trump refused to acknowledge the results, seeing them as the latest chapter in the "hoax," or "witch hunt," that began with Russia. He also stopped listening to advisers, like Barr, who wrote in his book that "Trump thought I was to blame" for Biden's "deception" at the debate about Hunter's laptop. Barr, once the whipping boy for Democrats for what they thought was too much fealty to Trump, was a star witness against the former president in some of the hearings into January 6.

As Trump became more isolated and undeterred by court rulings and news accounts that shot down his claims the election was rigged, he listened to people who, like him, had been caught up in the Russia inquiry. One was Giuliani and another was Flynn.

The *Times* would soon provide its own take on Flynn's journey. "It was the story of the Russia investigation as a malevolent plot that first began priming tens of millions of Americans to believe Mr. Trump's conspiracy theories about the deep state," the paper wrote shortly after Trump left office. "As one of the heroes of that narrative Mr. Flynn became an ideal messenger when it was refashioned into the demonstrably false claim that Democrats and their deep state allies had rigged the election." (A message seeking an interview with Flynn, sent to America's Future, the Florida-based group he chairs, went unanswered.)

On January 6, 2021, Trump's legacy, in most of the media and elsewhere, was sealed. Some of Trump's most devoted supporters—who also believed in his unsubstantiated claims of a rigged election—went wild, as Trump had predicted in a December tweet, leaving a dark stain on the Capitol, and the country.

A member of the Hawai'i Proud Boys group scratched "Murder the Media" on the Capitol's Memorial Door, while others chanted "CNN sucks." A photographer was thrown to the floor and had her camera ripped away after people in the crowd saw that she worked for the *New York Times*. Eleven protesters have been charged in connection with assaults on journalists or destruction of their equipment, according to the *Washington Post*. The *Times* photographer, Erin

Schaff, feared for her life, describing her attackers as “really angry” in an account she wrote for the paper.

Trump, in an interview in early August last year, said he “never wanted to see that happen,” referring to the violence that day, when I asked him if he had any regrets about January 6.

The attack came four years to the day after the fateful briefing by Comey, where he recounted the most salacious allegation in the now discredited dossier. I raised with Trump the coincidence of January 6 being bookends, of a sort, to his tenure. His face lit up: “That was a famous day,” he said. “The sixth seems to be a big thing.”

When I asked what mistakes he made, he paused before offering two examples: the first traces back to the Russia probe and the second to the 2020 election.

“Jeff Sessions was a mistake,” he said, referring to his first attorney general, who recused himself from the Russia inquiry. He explained he had been to Washington “only seventeen times in my life, and I never stayed over,” so “when I got there, I didn’t know any people in Washington.” As a result, he made some poor personnel decisions, such as Sessions.

“What I do regret,” he went on, “is that the Republicans didn’t have the apparatus to stop the crooked vote” in 2020.

As I left his office, Trump insisted I take an account of an audit of Arizona’s votes in 2020, which he told me was “finding all these ballots and phantom votes.”

On my way out he made a last-minute call to ensure he was getting french fries with his dinner. I headed to my car, past the Secret Service detail, along the beautiful, lush contours of his golf course, and watched the darkness begin to descend.

## **AFTERWORD**

I’ve avoided opining in my more than fifty years as a reporter. This time, however, I felt obligated to weigh in. Why? Because I am worried about journalism’s declining credibility and society’s increasing polarization. The two trends, I believe, are intertwined.

My main conclusion is that journalism’s primary missions, informing the public and holding powerful interests accountable, have been undermined by the erosion of journalistic norms and the media’s own lack of transparency about its work. This combination adds to people’s distrust about the media and exacerbates frayed political and social differences.

One traditional journalistic standard that wasn’t always followed in the Trump-Russia coverage is the need to report facts that run counter to the prevailing narrative. In January 2018, for example, the *New York Times* ignored a publicly available document showing that the FBI’s lead investigator didn’t think, after ten months of inquiry into possible Trump-Russia ties, that there

was much there. This omission disserved *Times* readers. The paper says its reporting was thorough and “in line with our editorial standards.”

My last reporting project for the *Times*, in 2005, was an inquiry into US propaganda efforts abroad. I interviewed a former top CIA expert on behavior and propaganda, Jerrold Post, who told me that leaving important information out of a broadcast or story lowers public trust in the messenger because consumers inevitably find the missing information somewhere else. (And Post, who died a few years ago, spoke before the arrival of social media.)

Another axiom of journalism that was sometimes neglected in the Trump-Russia coverage was the failure to seek and reflect comment from people who are the subject of serious criticism. The *Times* guidelines call it a “special obligation.” Yet in stories by the *Times* involving such disparate figures as Joseph Mifsud (the Maltese academic who supposedly started the whole FBI inquiry), Christopher Steele (the former British spy who authored the dossier), and Konstantin Kilimnik (the consultant cited by some as the best evidence of collusion between Russia and Trump), the paper’s reporters failed to include comment from the person being criticized. The *Times*, in a statement, says some of the subjects were approached on occasion, yet the paper’s guidelines also call for their comments to be published.

Another exhibit is a familiar target: anonymous sources. I’ve used them myself, including, sparsely, in this piece. What’s different in the Trump era, however, is both the volume of anonymous sources and the misleading way they’re often described.

One frequent and vague catchphrase—“people (or person) familiar with”—is widely used by many journalists: the *Times* used it over a thousand times in stories involving Trump and Russia between October 2016 and the end of his presidency, according to a Nexis search. The last executive editor I worked for, Bill Keller, frowned on its use. He told the staff repeatedly the phrase was “so vague it could even mean the reporter.” The *Times*, in a statement to CJR, said, “We have strong rules in place governing the use of anonymous sources.” Other outlets mentioned in this piece declined to discuss their anonymous-sourcing practices.

Another anonymous-sourcing convention that was turbocharged in the Trump era was the use of more neutral descriptors like “government official” or “intelligence official” or “American official” to mask congressional leakers. A few reporters admitted that to me, but, of course, only anonymously. Here’s how it works. First, a federal agency like the CIA or FBI secretly briefs Congress. Then Democrats or Republicans selectively leak snippets. Finally, the story comes out, using vague attribution. “It was a problem for us,” Mike Kortan, the former FBI spokesman until 2018, told me. Kortan, who also worked in Congress, added: “We would brief Congress, try and give them a full picture with the negative stuff, and then a member of Congress can cherry-pick the information and the reporter doesn’t know they’ve been cherry-picked.” The typical reader or viewer is clueless.

My final concern, and frustration, was the lack of transparency by media organizations in responding to my questions. I reached out to more than sixty journalists; only about half responded. Of those who did, more than a dozen agreed to be interviewed on the record.



However, not a single major news organization made available a newsroom leader to talk about their coverage.

My reporting has been criticized by journalists, from the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, in the 1980s, to *Harper's* magazine in the 1990s and the *Daily Beast* in the 2000s. When I've had the opportunity to respond, which hasn't always been the case, I've tried to engage. On a few occasions, I concluded the inquiring reporter wasn't really open to what I had to say, so I let my story speak for itself.

But during this time, when the media is under extraordinary attack and widely distrusted, a transparent, unbiased, and accountable media is more needed than ever. It's one of a journalist's best tools to distinguish themselves from all the misinformation, gossip, and rumor that proliferates on the Web and then gets legitimized on occasion by politicians of all stripes, including Trump.

Most Americans (60 percent) say they want unbiased news sources. Yet 86 percent think the media is biased. The consequences of this mismatch are all too obvious: 83 percent of the audience for Fox News leans Republican while 91 percent of the readers of the *New York Times* lean Democratic.

Jennifer Kavanagh, senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me of her concerns about news silos.

"If you are only getting your news from one source, you are getting a skewed view," which, she said, "increases polarization" and "crowds out the room for compromise, because people base their views on these siloed news sources." She added: "People don't have time to deal with nuance, so they settle on a position and everything else tends to become unacceptable."

Walter Lippmann wrote about these dangers in his 1920 book *Liberty and the News*. Lippmann worried then that when journalists "arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their own consciences what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable."

### ***A note on disclosure***

In 2015–16, I was a senior reporter at *ProPublica*. There, I reported on Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and Russian oligarchs, among other subjects. I helped *ProPublica* decide whether to collaborate with a book that was critical of the Clintons' involvement with Russia; the arrangement didn't happen. Another of the projects I worked on, also involving Clinton, was published in the *Washington Post* in 2016, where I shared a byline. Some of my other Clinton-related work was used in 2016 articles appearing in the *New York Times*, my employer between 1976 and 2005, but without my byline. Initially, the *Times* sought my assistance on a story about Hillary's handling of Bill Clinton's infidelity. Subsequently I approached the paper on

my own about the Clinton family foundation. In both cases, I interacted with reporters and editors but was not involved in the writing or editing of the stories that used my reporting. During the second interaction, I expressed disappointment to one of the *Times* reporters about the final result.

I left *ProPublica* in December 2016. That month I was approached by one of the cofounders of Fusion GPS, who sounded me out about joining a Trump-related project the firm was contemplating. The discussion did not lead to any collaboration. I had previously interacted with Fusion related to my reporting on Russian oligarchs.

In the 2017–18 academic year I was a nonresident fellow at the Investigative Reporting Program, affiliated with the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. There, one of my projects involved looking into the dossier as part of preliminary research for a 2020 film the Investigative Reporting Program helped produce for HBO on Russian meddling. I was not on the film's credits.

At CJR, these stories have been edited by Kyle Pope, its editor and publisher. Kyle's wife, Kate Kelly, is a reporter for the Washington bureau of the *New York Times*. CJR's former board chair was Steve Adler, formerly the editor in chief of Reuters; its current board chair is Rebecca Blumenstein, a former deputy managing editor of the Times who recently became president of editorial for NBC News.